DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 791 PS 028 378

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TITLE Increased Student Achievement through Parental Involvement and Increased Student Responsibility.

PUB DATE 1999-12-00

NOTE 70p.; Master's Action Research Project, Saint Xavier University and IRI/Skylight.

PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses (040) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160) .

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Action Research; *Assignments; Change Strategies; Educational Technology; Elementary Education; Group Activities; Homework; Intervention; *Parent Participation; Parent Teacher Cooperation; *Student Improvement; *Student Responsibility

IDENTIFIERS Voice Mail

ABSTRACT

This action research project addressed the problem of missing assignments among fourth- and fifth-graders at a school in northern Illinois. In order to document the extent to which students lacked responsibility for turning in daily assignments, the teacher-researchers kept track of missing assignments for each student and grade book records for 6 weeks to establish a baseline. The school's entire teaching staff and all parents of the targeted students were also surveyed. An intervention was developed to increase the percentage of students completing assignments through: (1) parental involvement; (2) improved home-school communication; and (3) student interdependence. The intervention specifically involved an automated daily voice mail system to inform parents of school assignments, a cooperative peer support system with rewards for 100 percent completion of assignments, and a "Completed Homework Tally Sheet." Data from the tally sheets and a concluding parent survey indicated a slight (2 percent) improvement in timely homework completion. Only 32 percent of parents indicated they used the voice mail system, compared to 79 percent who said on the first survey that they would use it. Eleven appendices include survey materials and cooperative group checklists. (Contains 32 references.) (EV)

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INCREASED STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND INCREASED STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY

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An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

Saint Xavier University & IRI/Skylight
Field-Based Masters Program
Chicago, Illinois

December, 1999

CS 028 278

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ABSTRACT

This report describes a program that increases student, teacher, and parent communication regarding daily and long-term assignments. The targeted population consists of late elementary students in a growing middle class community, located in northern Illinois. The problem of incomplete or missing assignments were documented through data revealing the percentage of students who failed to turn in assignments.

Analysis of probable cause data revealed that students lacked responsibility in writing assignments down in assignment books, taking necessary materials home, and communicating assignments to parents for their help. Faculty reported student inabilities in successfully turning in completed homework assignments. Reviews of literature, surveys, and instructional strategies revealed that a lack of parental involvement and student responsibility leads to poor assignment completion.

A review of solution strategies suggested by knowledgeable others, in combination with an analysis of the problem setting, resulted in the selection of three major interventions: cooperative grouping to assure that materials needed to complete assignments are collected and ready to go home, and a daily voice message to assure that parents are kept abreast of daily and long-range assignments.

Post intervention data indicated a slight increase in the percentage of students who turned in daily and long-range assignments. The daily voice message and cooperative grouping to check assignment books raised the percentage of finished assignments by a two percent margin.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of Problem

Students of the targeted fourth and fifth grade classes demonstrate a lack of intrinsic motivation to complete assignments in a quality manner. Poor parent/school communication also seems inadequate and results in missed assignments. This inhibits academic achievement. Evidence for the existence of this problem includes anecdotal notes, grade book records, previous report-cards with teacher comments, and local and state assessments.

Immediate Problem Context

The site of this study is a school that houses 658 (1996 - 1997 school year) students, kindergarten through fifth grade. Of these 658 students, 95.7 percent are Caucasian, 0.8 percent are African-American, 2.1 percent are Hispanic,1.4 percent are Asian, and 0.0 percent are Native American. A small percentage of students, four percent, come from low income families. These students may be receiving public aid, living in institutions for neglected or delinquent children, being supported in foster homes with public funds, or be eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches. The attendance rate for this school is 96.0 percent and there is a mobility rate of ten percent.

The majority of full-time teachers in this building, like the

student body, are of Caucasian racial background. There are a total of 803 full time teachers in the district. The schools Caucasian population equals 96.8 percent. The remaining faculty is .05 percent African-American, 2.5 percent Hispanic, 0.1 percent Asian, and 0.1 Native American. Of the 803 teachers, 25.8 percent are male and 74.2 percent are female. The average teaching experience is 13.8 years. The percentage of teachers with a Bachelor's degree is 46.7. The percentage of teachers with a Master's degree is 53.3. The average salary of the districts 803 teachers is $41,866.

This site has an effective Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) that has held many successful fund raisers providing students with new playground equipment and printers for classrooms. In addition to the high degree of involvement in the PTO, many parents participate in numerous educational support programs.

The site is part of a unit district that comprises an area of 116 square miles. It is one of the eleven, kindergarten through fifth grade, schools. The school is set in a suburban neighborhood. The enrollment of the district has steadily increased since the middle of the 1980's. The greatest growth has been during the past five years with enrollment expanding by over three thousand students since September of 1991. This school is at an uncomfortable enrollment size for the physical space available. The average class size for kindergarten through fourth grade are 28.0, fifth grade's average is 30.

The financial plan for the school district is above the state's average in only one area. According to the 1995 - 1996 expenditure of funds, the district spends 58.7 percent of their funds on education compared to the state average of 75.3 percent.

Operating expenditure per pupil is $4,875 dollars and the state average is $6,158 dollars. The average spent on transportation is 4.5 percent, slightly higher that the 3.5 percent state average. The school district's expenditures from the bond and interest fund is 1.8 percent compared to the state's 5.0 percent average. The expenditures from the district's site and construction/capital improvement fund is currently 26.7 percent. The state average is 3.9 percent.

All schools in this district operate under a site-based management philosophy. The school improvement team in each building has set working goals for their site. Three of the major goals in the school improvement plan include: social studies curriculum adoption, keeping current with technology, and a staff development program for teaching writing strategies. The staff is also currently in the process of aligning their curriculum and assessment to the new state standards. An additional concern is that this school is running out of space to house resource teachers and certified support staff and currently has two mobile classrooms. The special education program needs to have instructional space to conduct resource classes.

The Surrounding Community

The community is located in a suburban area that has been experiencing rapid population growth. This is due to an influx of new housing developments and the turnover of existing homes from older residents to younger families with children. The first census (1960) taken after the schools inception in 1956 showed the population of the community to be 2014 residents. A special 1996 census indicated the population of this village had grown to

19,007. John D. Kasarda from Chapel Hill North Carolina was contracted to complete a demographic study in April 1997, by this district. He predicted that the village will grow to 31,526 by the year 2020.

The racial/ethnic background of the surrounding community is 81.0 percent Caucasian, 3.6 percent African-American, 13.8 percent Hispanic, 1.2 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.4 percent Native American. Of this population 12.7 percent are classified as students from low income families receiving public aid.

Regional and National Context of Problem

A lack of intrinsic motivation to complete assignments in a quality manner is an ongoing concern of educators and parents alike. Areas of concern are: what constitutes an appropriate assignment, what amount and type of parental involvement is required for a child, appropriate types and levels of communication between school and family, and how are students best motivated to learn and achieve academic success.

Increased homework is being assigned by teachers in more grades than ever before.(Dodge, 1995) Guidelines are being adopted by districts requiring teachers to give regular homework assignments every night. According to Lee Canter, author of Homework Without Tears, recent Gallup Poll statistics showed that the most frequently recurring problem in school is the subject of homework. Students and parents are upset because nightly battles with children are the results of homework assignments. Yet to succeed in school, students must do homework and do it well.(Canter, 1987)

It may seem that the expanding gap between schools and

community is a recent phenomenon. However, as J. O'Callaghan points out, as quoted by Mir Baiz Khan (1996, p.59), "that schools and parents have always been recognized as partners not only in the education of children but also in their socialization." O'Callaghan thinks that it is only in the past few decades that the partnership between home and school has deteriorated. He believes that families blame schools for drop outs; educators blame divorced, single-parent, remarried, and two-career families for disrespectful attitudes of the students; and community agencies blame both family and school for problems with the youth.

In his article "Educating Our Children in the 90's" Carl Ostach (1990, p.28) indicates that even though countless efforts have been made to reform the public school system so that American children can compete on an international level, "the most critical battle zone for combating and conquering our nation's woes remains within each household; parents must join forces with their children to overcome the education crisis." Ostach concludes his article by saying "The education message for the '90s is clear and unequivocal. Parents, it's time to spend time educating your children." (p.30)

Research shows that parental involvement has a positive impact on student performance. In addition, parents who get involved in school programs and activities foster positive attitudes toward school personnel and mobilize support for school initiatives (Becher, 1984). So why aren't more parents involved in schools today?

According to Mir Baiz Khan (1996, p.62), research has given us information regarding barriers that parents may have which prevent them from their involvement in schools. Some of these

reasons include: health problems, economic differences between parents and teachers, work responsibilities, feelings of inadequacy, failure, and poor self-worth, previous negative experiences with school, and a variety of cultural differences. Khan indicates that one author, Liontos, goes on to express that parents with certain cultural backgrounds and many low-income parents regard schools as an institutionalized authority, hence the responsibility to teach their children lies solely on the educator. This is supported by Judy Dodge, who shows parents often say, "Why do we have to teach kids how to study? That's the school's job."(Dodge, 1995, p.74) Furthermore, many parents struggle with language hurdles that make involvement more challenging.

In a 1997 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, teachers and principles indicate that "they no longer have the parental support they once enjoyed."(p.51) Most people have concerns about the education of an upcoming generation. Without parents' support; effective education is next to impossible. "Studies show that successful students have parents who create and maintain family routines", according to R.M. Clark as quoted in Strong Families, Strong Schools a U.S. Department of Education report.(p.9)

In addition to parental involvement in the lives of their children and in the school, parent communication with schools is a national concern. Administrators, school improvement teams, teachers, and parents alike have identified this as a problem that is interfering with students' academic achievement. Surveys completed by Indianapolis parents showed that they wished the schools would keep them better informed (Warner, 1991). Parents

need to keep informed so that they can help with homework, attend school functions, and work with their child's teacher on specific aspects of their education. Davies indicated parents will be intrinsically involved if they are kept abreast of social and academic progress. (Davies, 1996)

According to Carl H. Rinne (1998 p. 620) "Student motivation is another chronic concern in schools today". In his article "Motivating Students is a Percentage Game", Rinne indicates that other experts in the field, like William Glasser, believes that the consistent effort to learn is missing from regular secondary classrooms. Another expert referred to by Rinne, Susan Harter believes that student motivation for high grades drives some students to purposely select easy tasks that can be completed without the effort required to truly learn something new.

As cited by Kelly, David P. Langford, the Continuous Improvement Process coordinator at Mt. Edgecumbe H.S. in Sitka AK, believes that students think that school is "something they have done to them", instead of seeing school as a system in which they play an important part. According to Langford, this view minimizes student ownership resulting in a mind set where students believe that they should "do as little as possible to get the highest grade." (Kelly, 1991 p. 52)

Many times children who appear to lack motivation are called underachievers. Sylvia B. Rimm (p. 18) in her article "An Underachievement Epidemic" said that she received "more than 20,000 calls and 5,00 letters" after a five - minute segment on NBC's Today show, when she described the problem of underachievement. According to Rimm, underachievers are students whose work is significantly below their potential. Carolyn Coil

(1992) believes that underachievers fear failure, have low self esteem and lack basic study skills.

As educators strive to infuse their teaching with interesting, fun and appealing lessons, much of the growth and achievement is built on hard work. Rinne, in his article "Motivating Students is a Percentage Game" (1998) quoted Edison's formula for invention which states that invention is 10 percent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration. He goes on to point out that it is the 10 percent of inspiration that drives one to complete the other 90 percent of the work. Fanning the flame of inspiration drives students to endure the work required to learn and grow. It is paramount to student achievement.

As mentioned above inappropriate assignments, a lack of, or inappropriate parental involvement, poor communication and a lack of attention to the motivational needs of students all have a huge impact on a students intrinsic desire to learn and achieve.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

In order to document the extent to which students lack the responsibility for turning in daily assignments and also to document the existence of a gap in parent/school communication regarding assignments, the teacher-researchers kept track of missing assignments for each student and grade book records to establish a baseline for six weeks. Classroom subjects of English, reading, and math were chosen. The teacher-researchers felt that it was important to target classes that did not involve other teachers who were not part of the study. The targeted 4th- and 5th-graders do have other teachers for music, science, and social studies, so it was decided not to track these subjects. Daily assignments had to be turned in exactly when they were due to be counted for the baseline as complete.

To further document the existence of these problems, the teacher-researchers surveyed the entire teaching staff of the targeted school and all students of the targeted 4th- and 5th-grade classrooms. All parents of children in the targeted classes were surveyed as well. Interviews of select students were also conducted. Both the surveys and the interviews focused on student responsibility for assignments and parent/school communication

about these assignments.

Within the first two weeks of the study, teachers were surveyed. The survey (Appendix A) consisted of four questions which focused on the extent to which students responsibly turned in their daily assignments. An analysis of the results

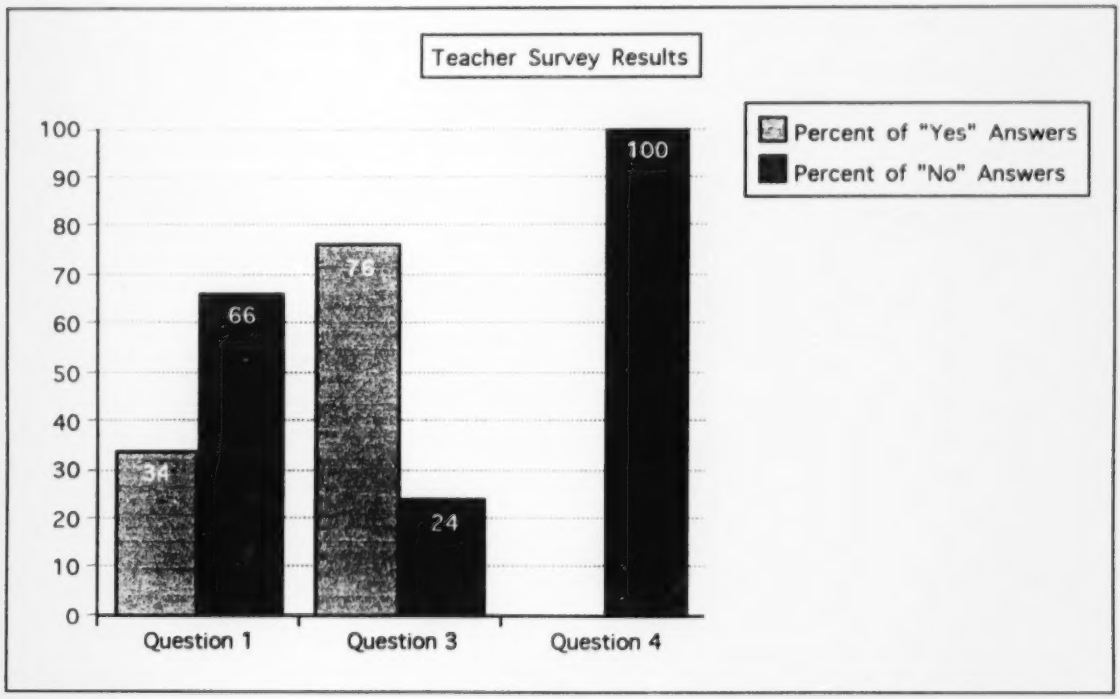

Figure 1. Responses to questions in Teacher's Survey (Appendix B).

(Appendix B) showed that 34 percent of teachers felt that students returning daily assignments was a problem in their classrooms. In looking at the responses to question #2 of the survey, teacher-researchers found that the percentage of students turning in daily assignments varied within the school. Teachers in the targeted school reported that the percentage of students in their classes that did not turn in homework on a timely basis ranged from 0% to 45%.

Seventy-six percent of the teachers expected that their students use their assignment books. The teacher-researchers felt that this percentage was not higher because primary teachers were part of the survey and their students do not use assignment books. The school recently began using a phone system capable of recording daily voice messages for parents. At the time of the survey, no teachers were using a daily voice message to communicate assignments to parents.

Shortly after the teacher survey was completed, a pupil survey was administered. (Appendix C) Interpretation of this

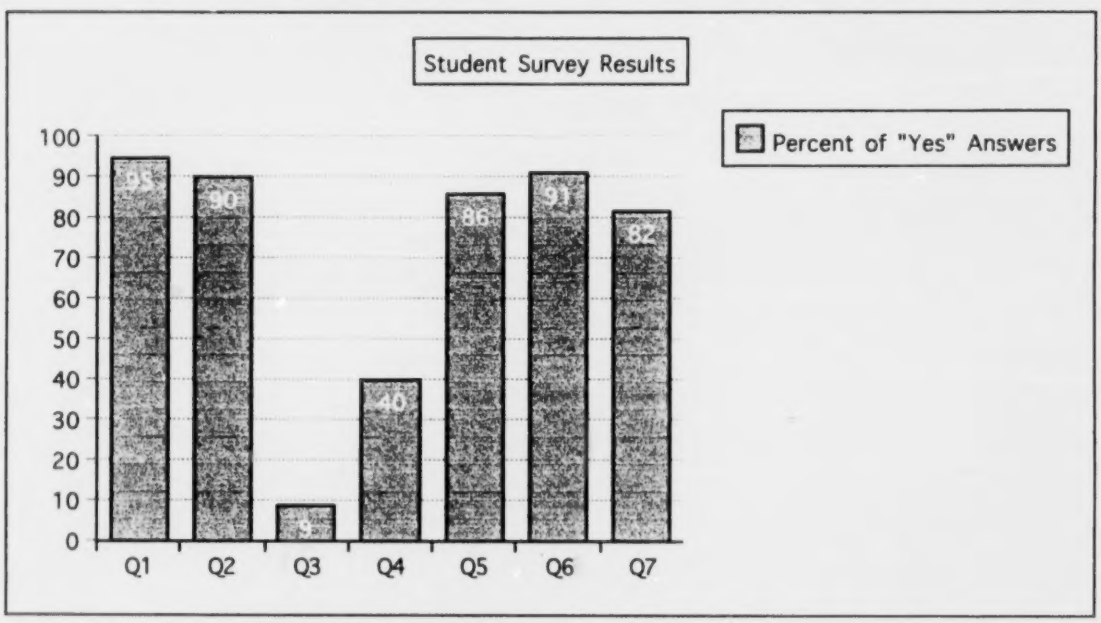

Figure 2. Results from the Student Survey (Appendix D).

data showed that 95% of students surveyed responded that they believe they complete daily assignments. (Appendix D) Ninety percent of students surveyed indicated that they felt they filled out their assignment books. Many teachers in this school do this as a whole-class activity at the end of the day. In analyzing

question three and four, of the 5 percent who responded that they do not turn in daily assignments, 9 percent said that they do not fill out their assignment books, and 40 percent said that they forget their books and materials at school, making it hard to complete and turn in that required work. Using data from question five shows that 86 percent of the students felt that their parents were interested enough in their school work to ask about it. The teacher researchers were pleased with this high percentage. Ninety-one percent of the students reported that they do understand their assignments. This removes a roadblock in assignment completion. The final question shows that 82 percent of the children surveyed said that their parents do help them with their homework. Teacher researchers felt that this level of parent involvement with daily assignments would show a high percentage of assignments completed on time.

After the student survey was completed and tabulated, a parent survey was administered. (Appendix E). Eight questions were focused on the parents' explanation of his/her opinion of various parts of daily assigned work done at home.

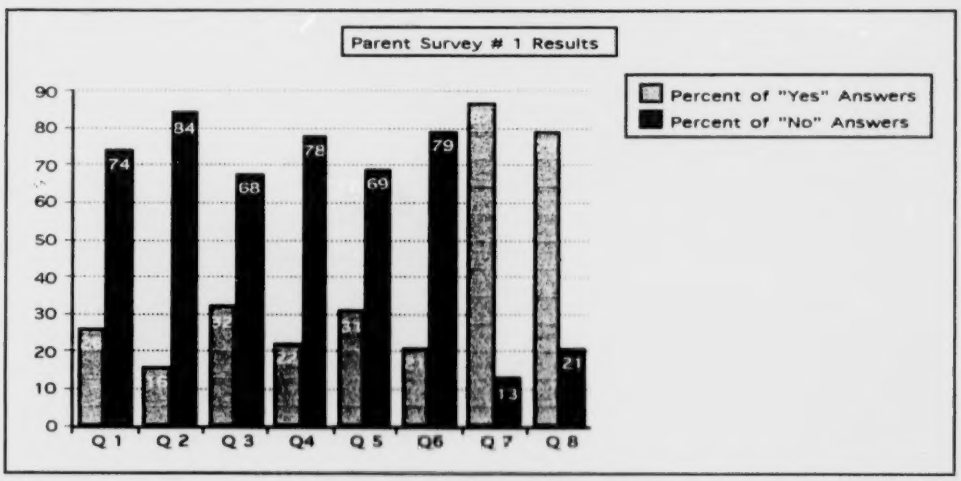

Figure 3. Results of Parent Survey (Appendix F)

Analysis of the results of the first parent survey show that one quarter of the parents responding felt their children had problems getting homework done. Only sixteen percent of the parents responding reported that their child does not take the assignment book home. Eighty-seven percent said that there was a consequence for not completing their homework. Seventy-nine percent of the parents said that if a voice mail system was provided they would use it. (Appendix F)

In conclusion, the teachers interviewed for this study felt that a significant percentage of their students did not turn in their daily assignments on time. Teacher-researchers noted from their anecdotal records and grade books that certain students consistently did not turn in their homework. A high percentage of students felt that they forgot materials at school, which makes it hard to complete assignments. A large percentage of parents help their children with assignments and said they would use a daily voice message system to learn what homework assignments were.

Probable Causes

As can be seen from the chart in Appendix I, the school population at the site has not changed significantly in the last 6 years. While the make-up of the student population has not changed, teachers frequently discuss a noticeable change in student study skills, especially in the area of student responsibility for daily assignments.

Recent literature regarding the connection between homework and academic achievement highlight several notable reasons for concern.

First, homework is an integral part of increased student academic achievement. The government report What Works (1987 p. 41), published by the U. S. Department of Education, indicates that "Student achievement rises significantly when teachers regularly assign homework, and students conscientiously do it." In a British study cited by Richard M. Haynes and Donald M. Chalker in their article "The Making of a World Class Elementary School" published in Principal, (1998 p. 8), Haynes and Chalker imply that research shows a "positive correlation between homework and learning quality at all ages." They say that "Homework is a valuable learning enhancement activity of world-class schools."

If homework is so important to academic achievement why are some students displaying increasing inability to responsibly complete homework assignments? James Garbarino, in his article "Educating Children in a Socially Toxic Environment" Educational Leadership (1997, p. 14) suggests "Beyond the immediate threats to children, many other issues are subtle, yet equally serious. High on the list is the departure of adults from the lives of kids - and some studies report a 50 percent decrease over the past 30 years in the amount of time parents are spending with kids in constructive activities." Sylvia B. Rimm in "An Underachievement Epidemic" article published in Educational Leadership (1997, p. 20) states "A most lethal cause of student underachievement is parents' lack of support for schools and teachers. Disrespect for education by parents sabotages educators power to teach." Hayes and Chalker (p. 8) state "In every country we visited, as well as the US, we found that the students who achieve come from homes where parents engage them in learning and support their schools. We call this an "educational ethic."Principal (1998).

Researchers and professionals in education are not the only ones cognizant of this trend. In the U. S. Department of Education Report called Strong Families, Strong Schools, the PTA/ Newsweek National Education Survey (1993, p. IV) is quoted as saying "Forty percent of parents across the country believe that they are not devoting enough time to their children's education." Strong Families, Strong Schools also quoted a Louis Harris and Associates survey (1993, p. IV) that indicated that "Teachers ranked strengthening parents' roles in their children's learning as the issue that should receive the highest priority in public education policy over the next few years." Even business according to Strong Families, Strong Schools, a quote from "School Reform: Big Pain, Little Gain. a Fortune Magazine article (November 1993 p. IV), identified concerns regarding parental involvement, "Eighty-nine percent of company executives identified the biggest obstacle to school reform as a lack of parental involvement."

The research is clear, daily or long term assignments, commonly referred to as homework, are important to the continued academic success of students. Teachers who do not assign, or students who do not conscientiously complete, these assignments inhibit the academic growth of the student. In addition, parental involvement in the process of student assignment completion is noted to be decreasing in recent years and is a growing concern for students, parents, teachers, and community members.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

The lack of internal motivation to complete assignments in a quality manner and ineffective parent/school communication, which often results in missed assignments, inhibits students' academic achievement. Experts including Bauch, Belanca, Canter, Charles, Cooper, Davies, Fogarty, Gott, Henderson, Nuzum, Purnell, Riley and Wahlberg suggest several solutions to these educational concerns. These solutions include: increased parental involvement, effective parent/school communication, and enhanced positive student interdependence. All of which are necessary to achieve success in today's school environment.

Parental Involvement

Richard W. Riley, (1996) the U.S. Secretary of Education as cited in the U.S. Department of Education publication The Partnership for Family Involvement in Education says that "The American family is the bedrock on which a strong education foundation must be built to prepare our children for the rigors of the 21st century."(p. 7) He also documents what he believes are seven good practices for families. These are as follows:

- Read together. It's the starting point of all

learning. Read with your youngsters. Share a good book with your teen.

- Use TV wisely. Limit viewing to no more than two hours a school day.
- Stay in regular contact with your child's teacher. Encourage your child to take challenging courses at school. Check homework every day.
- Join with your child's teachers and principal to compare your school program against high standards of excellence so your children can reach their full potential.
- Know where your children are, especially your teens. Encourage them to join youth groups. Support community efforts to keep children safe and off the streets after hours.
- Talk directly to your children about the values you want them to have and about the dangers of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco-it could literally save their lives.(p. 7)

In his article about successful schools, Don Davies stated, "The best comprehensive plan includes: parent education and family support, family and community volunteers in many different roles, varied approaches to home-school communication, including E-mail and web pages, strategies that foster children's learning at home and in the community settings, decision making and governance participation, and varied school-community exchanges." (Davies, 1996, p. 14) Davies goes on to say that parental involvement is

essential and the message must be sent to families that learning doesn't stop at the school-house door.

According to the Oregon State Department of Education's publication, Parental Involvement: The Critical Link, involved parents "can create a 'curriculum of the home' that teaches their children what matters. They do this through their daily conversations, household routines, attention to school matters, and affectionate concern for their children's progress."(p. 14)

Lee Canter, a specialist in parental involvement indicates that it is clear the parents who attend school events, volunteer, and communicate regularly with teachers encourage student achievement, and that parents and community members who speak positively about their schools produce students who feel the same way. The teacher researchers agree with Canter and have also found that successful students mirror the values of hard work and diligence passed to them by their parents and teachers. Canter's feeling is that when partnerships are formed with the teacher and parents, the children know that home and school are putting up an united front to help them succeed. He believes this message will bring results. Homework is a part of that message, it has proven to be a powerful tool for ensuring a child's success in school. "Look at homework as a daily opportunity to have a positive impact on your children's education and future". (Canter, 1996, p. 4)

Walberg (1984) had similar thoughts, his viewpoint was that a partnership between parents and teachers can improve school achievement. He stated that empirical studies of homework have shown that it "produces an effect on achievement that is three times as large as family socioeconomic status (as indexed by parental income, education, and occupation)." Gott and Purnell

(1985) as quoted by Arlene Johnson (1990) states that when parents are involved student behavior improves and grades get better. Also, they found that attendance and motivation increases. Canter (1987, p. 7) reinforces this opinion by saying, "When you support homework, you strengthen the school's programs and their effectiveness. Everybody benefits - parents, teachers, and especially the students."

Cooper (1989, p.90) indicates his belief in homework for elementary school students. He thinks, "Homework for young children should help them develop good study habits, foster positive attitudes toward school, and communicate to students the idea that learning takes place at home as well as at school." He goes on to add that, "in earlier grades parents should be more involved. Their role should permit them to express how much they value school achievement."

Studies have shown improvement in achievement even when the parent had no specific training. Henderson (1988, p. 149) says, "Parental involvement in almost any form appears to produce measurable gains in student achievement." Without parents' support, effective education is next to impossible. Luckily, most parents care about their child's education and want to help. Yet many parents are not knowledgeable about their child's school programs, homework assignments, or how to help at home.

Doctor Sandra J. Balli in her article "Family Diversity and the Nature of Parental Involvement" cited D. H. Demo who said that "Changing family roles and increased work responsibilities for men and women have given rise to a climate of detached support in the home."(p. 153) Mary Sullivan and Paul Sequeira cited Doyle and Barber in their article "The Impact of Purposeful Homework on

Learning" and "noted that at this point that not all homes are able to be supportive of homework. There are an increasing number latch-key children who return from school to empty homes, with parents or parental figures not present until late in the day. Parental help may be limited or unavailable because of economic priorities or crowded schedules".(p. 348)

The Iowa State Department of Education suggested the following guidelines for parents to assist their children with their homework:

> Parents encourage good study habits by establishing homework routines early. Here are some suggestions to help children be successful with homework.
>
> · Agree together on a regular time and place for homework.
>
> · Turn off the TV when it is family homework time.
>
> · Make sure your child understands the assignment.
>
> · Ask to see your child's homework folder or assignment calendar each day. Talk about what your child is learning in school.
>
> · Make suggestions in a positive way such as, "The teacher will understand your ideas better if you write in your best handwriting."
>
> · Discuss teachers' homework expectations during teacher-parent conferences.
>
> · Don't do your children's homework. Make sure

they understand that homework is their responsibility.

- Contact the teacher by phone, note, or in person when your child is having trouble with homework assignments. Don't fight with your child about homework.
- Help with assignments by checking for completeness, neatness, and accuracy.
- Establish a place where completed homework is placed (for example, by the front door or in the child's backpack, so it won't be forgotten when your child leaves for school).
- Follow-up on homework assignments by asking to see your children's homework after it has been returned by the teacher.
- Be sure to encourage your children and praise them for a job well done.
- Display particularly good papers in your home.
- Be tolerant of homework not being done perfectly - your child is learning many new skills that are not yet perfected.(p. 37)

Rosemary Black in her article "The Best Ways to Help with Homework" as published in Parents magazine, said that "the key is to be supportive without actually doing your child's homework for her."(p. 79)

Effective Parent School Communication

The U.S. Department of Education report Strong Families, Strong Schools (1995) encouraged family learning through homework

assignments, and the use of technology, such as homework hot lines, voice mail, and electronic mail to help families achieve academic success. The U.S. Department of Education Report, Reaching all Families: Creating Family Friendly Schools (1996, p. 30) also supports the acquisition of telephone answering systems that "permits teachers to record homework assignments and suggestions to parents for home learning as well as giving parents a chance to leave messages when they need assistance." Parents and students can call at any time to keep abreast of daily course work and class activities. Davies echoes the use of technology by saying that only one out of every ten schools use both traditional and innovative communication approaches. Don Davies suggests schools might have and utilize telephones with voice mail capabilities. (Davies, 1996)

The Transparent School concept, developed in the Betty Phillips Center for Parenthood Education at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University in 1987, had powerful effects on home/school communication in several pilot schools. The model uses answering machines or electronic mailboxes parents can call to hear a message from their child's teacher. One of the methods of this concept is as follows: "At the end of the day the teacher enters a 1-3 minute message that describes learning activities, homework, and how parents can support the child's study at home. Then parents can call at any time from anywhere and hear exactly what they need to know. Gaining access to this information when a child is ill or absent also enables parents to help the child keep up with the rest of the class." (Bauch, 1989, p.33) Bauch quoted from Dr. Bissell, A colleagues Doctoral Dissertation to indicate that, "When parents became 'frequent users,' the homework

completion rates for students, as reported by their teachers, showed a significant increase. Of the 'frequent user' parents, 93 percent also noticed improvements in the attitudes and skills of their children." (Bauch, 1989, p. 33)

Positive Student Interdependence

Even when parents are provided with the information necessary to assist their child at home, additional assistance may be required to simply prepare disorganized students with the necessities to complete the daily assignments. Cooperative learning provides this additional needed assistance. This grouping technique promotes positive interpersonal relationships while continuing to hold students accountable. A pioneer of cooperative learning, Johnson, (as cited in Bellanca & Folgarty 1991, p. 244), talks about five elements of cooperative learning. These elements are as follows:

1. Face-to-Fact Interaction. The physical arrangement of students in small, heterogeneous groups encourages students to help, share and support each other's learning.
2. Individual Accountability. Each student is responsible for the success and collaboration of the group and for mastering the assigned task.
3. Cooperative Social Skills. Students are taught, coached and monitored in the use of cooperative social skills, which enhance the group work.
4. Positive Interdependence. Students are structured by a common goal, group rewards,

role assignments and other means to assist each other in completing the learning task.

5. Group Processing. Students reflect on how well they work as a group to complete the task and how they can improve their teamwork.

Two of these directly apply to the focus here. First, the element that concentrates on individual accountability, "Each student is responsible for the success and collaboration of the group and for mastering the assigned task." and second the element that stresses positive interdependence, "Students are structured by a common goal, group rewards, role assignments and other means to assist each other in completing the learning task making sure each group member is prepared for assignment completion."(p. 244)

Students in cooperative learning task groups are provided with the most "powerful means for raising achievement, increasing positive attitudes towards school, developing skillful thinking, and increasing self esteem." (Belanca and Fogarty, 1991, p.30)

In their chapter called "Developing Responsibility Through Cooperation" in the book If Minds Matter: Volume Two, (1992) M. McCabe and J. Rhoades indicate that one of the findings of the California Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility recommended the use of cooperative learning because these strategies "are among the best researched innovations within education. Hundreds of studies demonstrate academic, social, and psychological benefits from well-implemented cooperative learning programs, with improved self-esteem and a sense of shared responsibility being important outcomes" (p. 212)

McCabe and Rhoades (1992) go on to discuss that some of the cooperative meeting management techniques should include student

training in acceptable standards of behavior, which should incorporate "being responsible for your own learning" and being "responsible for your own materials and assignments: Students have a responsibility to themselves and their cooperative group members to carry their share of the work load." (p. 214) They later indicate that through cooperative grouping "Students realize they are not lone entities; they learn that their actions or inactions affect others as well as themselves. Their learned social skills make them better prepared for future academic, social, and occupational endeavors."(p. 218) McCabe and Rhoades conclude their chapter by saying "Cooperative learning is a vehicle through which personal and social responsibility can be developed and reinforced."(p. 218)

By using cooperative grouping task groups as defined above and cooperative grouping base groups, at the end of each day, students that struggle with their individual organization would receive the additional help they may need to complete an assignment book and to get everything into their backpack that is needed for assignment completion at home. Margaret Nuzum, in her article Creating Homework Success, Instructor, (1998) suggested the use of homework buddies or groups to help. When assignments are given they can discuss the assignment and what they need to complete it (Nuzum,1998).

Bellanca and Fogarty (1991) also suggest the students work in cooperative learning base groups. Base groups are defined as the same people working together several times a week for a least a month and perhaps as much as a year. This will form the cohesive unit a classroom needs. They are the "classroom glue" so to speak. In base groups, students develop their teamwork, build

trust and solidify friendships. "There are a variety of uses for the base groups. In addition, to the team bonding activities, social skill practice sessions and goal evaluations, base groups serve as a place to review the week's work, discuss current events, connect the themes and topics studied in various content areas, plan social events, work out differences and solve problems. In essence, they are a safe and secure home environment that encourages positive interactions, trust and friendship development." (Bellanca, & Fogarty, 1991, p.35-36)

As a routine, each base group could have as a goal to make sure its members have all the tools necessary for completion of each assignment. According to C.M. Charles, of San Diego State University, as quoted in Building Classroom Discipline (1992, p.138) it is known that "teachers rated as most effective have put into place classroom routines that minimize disruption while maximizing productive work time." "It is strongly recommended that students in the class be assigned duties to help with routine procedures." (1992, p.140) Not only does this help teachers, says Charles, but it also tends to improve student attitude.

Based on the research mentioned above some possible solutions exist to increase student success of assignment completion and student success in general at school. The highlighted solutions in this report include parental involvement, communication, and the effects of cooperative groups on student preparedness and responsibility.

Project Objectives and Processes

The objective of this project is to increase the percentage

of students completing assignments, through parental involvement and improved home/school communication. In addition, the percentage of completed assignments will increase through improved positive student interdependence.

To accomplish these objectives, interventions of a daily voice mail system and a cooperative peer support system as suggested above, will be implemented. Results will be measured by statistical analysis and parental evaluation.

The following processes are necessary:

- A baseline percentage needs to be determined.
- An automated daily voice mail system needs to be established.
- Cooperative peer support system needs to be organized.
- A Completed Homework Tally Sheet needs to be developed.
- A list of rewards for cooperative groups needs to be developed.
- Final statistical analysis will be made.
- Final parent survey to analyze results.

Project Action Plan

November 16th - January 15th

1. Surveys to students and parents of the targeted groups are given and compiled by the classroom teacher along with a survey given to all teachers in the school.
2. A baseline for the percentage of assignments turned in on time is established by the classroom teacher.

January 18th - February 12th

1. Parent Information letter (Appendix G) is created and sent home to parents of the targeted group by classroom teacher.
2. Phone script for the automated daily voice message is

developed. List of daily and long term assignments will be placed on the voice message by each classroom teacher.

3. Classroom teacher will select cooperative group leaders to check daily the assignment books in their particular group as to being filled out completely and correctly. Homework Tally sheet will be created by the classroom teacher for this purpose.
4. At the end of the week rewards for 100% participation of the cooperative group will be passed out.

February 15th - March 12th

1. Another cooperative peer support system will be employed. The cooperative group leader will check daily that materials needed to complete assignments are collected by individual students and are ready to go home and placed in school bag.
2. At the end of that particular week, rewards for 100% participation of the cooperative group will be passed out.
3. Still incorporating the daily voice mail system and cooperative group leader checking assignment books.

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the interventions, a final statistical analysis will be made. Using the Completed Homework Tally Sheets, percentages will be developed to see if an increase in completed daily and long-term assignments has occurred. A final parent survey will be also be analyzed.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

When the students of intermediate classes demonstrate an inability to submit daily assignments it is detrimental to the students' academic progress and the progress of those around him or her. Failure in this area can be the result of poor parent/school communication, a break down in the organizational skills of the student, or misunderstanding of classroom procedures. Even though classroom procedure dictated that students be trained to actively maintain assignment books and daily classroom procedures assured their ongoing usage, teachers felt that students regularly did not turn in assignments and parents felt out of the communication link. After identifying this common problem within the students taught by the researchers, it was identified that the objective of this project would be to improve students' level of responsibility specifically in the area of turning in daily assignments. With this in mind, the following interventions were identified as necessary to assure continued academic progress and growth in the level of student responsibility. The first intervention was the development of a

cooperative peer support system aimed at supporting each individual student. The students were held to a level of accountability which required each student to leave school with an accurate and complete assignment book and backpack of the materials necessary to complete the assignments identified in the assignment book.

The second intervention was to utilize an automated daily voice message system which allowed parents to access an oral assignment book through the use of their telephone. With this objective and these interventions in mind the following action plan was established.

The first phase of the action plan was to collect data to evidence the problem. On November 16th two sets of surveys were handed out to each student in the four target classrooms. The first survey was completed in class by the students. This survey asked students to respond to questions regarding their ability to keep track of their assignments and to turn them in on a timely basis. The second survey handed to the students was to be taken home to their parents. A small reward was offered and given to those students who returned this survey. A third survey was distributed to the teaching staff at this school.

Assignments for math, reading, and writing were tracked from November 16 until January 15th. Students who did not turn their assignments in on the due date were marked. Students who were absent or who left the room for a given subject to be taught by a different teacher were not included in the tally for each assignment, hence the expected number of assignments anticipated to be returned varied with each assignment tally. At the end of this period the total number of student assignments returned on a

timely basis and the total number of student assignments not returned was tallied and a percentage calculated that represented the total number of students that returned these assignments on time.

A parent information letter was sent home to each of the targeted classrooms on January 15th. This letter informed parents of the interventions we planned to make to assist students regarding their ability to return assignments in a timely manner. This letter outlined the daily voice system, and gave specific phone numbers to use to activate it. It explained a cooperative peer system to check assignment books and organize materials. The letter was signed by each family and returned to class. The plan was also explained and modeled in each target classroom so that students understood what was expected.

The first intervention of the action plan was to establish a daily scheduled time to communicate with parents and students concerning nightly and long-range homework assignments. Teachers in the targeted classrooms recorded a daily voice message right after school listing each homework assignment and explaining any ongoing assignments. The four target teachers all used the same phone script for this message. This message system was introduced on January 18th and used for the duration of the action plan.

In addition, teachers selected cooperative group leaders to check the assignment books daily for their particular group to make sure they were filled out completely and correctly. Homework Tally Sheets were used by the selected student group leaders to document assignments were turned in on time and that assignment books were filled out correctly. These were collected at the end of each week.

The second phase of the action plan added an additional peer support system. The cooperative group leader also checked that necessary academic materials needed for homework completion were placed in school bags to go home. Cooperative group leaders checked daily assignment books as before with the addition of checking needed materials and making sure they were in school bags.

The daily voice message system was also used exactly as in the previous four weeks. New Homework Tally Sheets were used during this time period, February 15th - March 12th. They were collected at the end of each week.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In the first student survey 95% of the students indicated that they do their homework and 90% indicated that they use their assignment books. Eighty-two percent of the students said that their parents helped them with their homework.

The parent survey indicated that 16% of the children forgot to bring home assignment books, and 26% had problems getting their child to do his/her homework. Seventy-nine percent of those parents surveyed said they would use a daily automated message system that documented class assignments.

On the teacher survey, the instructors responded saying 34% felt returning of homework was a problem in their classroom. They also expected their students to use an assignment book. Formal instruction for the use of assignment books is introduced in third grade and additional instruction is provided throughout each subsequent school year. No one in this school was using a daily automated voice communication system.

The baseline was established by keeping track of the assignments in the areas of reading, writing, english, and math from November 16 through January 15. The researchers determined that an average of 91% of the students were returning their homework on a timely basis.

On February 12, tallies were made that showed that 93% of the children in the targeted classrooms were turning in homework on time after the interventions. This was during the period when cooperative learning groups and daily automated voice messages were used.

After the three interventions were employed: daily automated voice message system, cooperative groups to check assignment books, and cooperative groups to check backpacks, tallies showed that 93% of the children in the targeted classrooms were turning in homework on time.

In order to assess the effects of an automated daily voice message and the cooperative peer support systems, a weekly percentage tally was kept to determine an overall average for each intervention. This showed timely homework was maintained throughout the interventions. This data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Percentages of Children Turning in Homework on Time

	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Average
Baseline	87	92	92	92	91%
Intervention 1	86	95	99	91	93%
Intervention 2	87	99	94	92	93%

Intervention one appears to have had a positive effect on the targeted behaviors in two classrooms. Intervention two appears to have had an additional positive effect on the targeted behaviors in two classrooms. The remaining two classrooms remained consistent with their baseline averages.

A final parent survey was given to gain feedback concerning daily homework assignments and the daily voice message system These results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Final Parent Survey

Question	Percentage responding "Yes"
1. Do you have problems getting your child to do his/her homework assignments?	24%
2. Does your child forget to bring home the assignment book?	15%
3. Does your child forget to bring home the book or worksheet required to do the assignments?	28%
4. Do you have difficulty knowing what is assigned for homework?	20%
5. Did your family use the daily assignment voice message?	32%
6. If yes, was it useful in helping to know what your child's assignments were?	94%
7. How many times per week did you use the daily assignment voice message system?	Average:3

It is interesting to note that in comparing the results of this survey and the initial parent survey, the percentage of parents who have difficulty getting their children to do homework increased by two percentage points. The percentage of parents who had children forget their assignment books at school dropped by one percentage point during the intervention period. Children forgetting books and materials dropped by four percentage points during the intervention period as well. Only 32% of the families responding to our final survey said that they used the daily assignment voice message system in contrast with 79% saying that they would use such a system if provided. 94% of those parents that used the system found it helpful, however, it was only used an average of three times per week.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the presentation and analysis of the data researchers gathered, the students showed a slight improvement in turning in homework in a timely manner. The greatest improvement occurred when parents were provided with a good communication system outlining daily and long-range homework assignments. Students were also supported and encouraged by peers to write down homework assignments and organize materials to take home. Literature supports the use of cooperative grouping and the power of positive peer pressure in enhancing the desired model behaviors. The researchers did not separate the daily automated voice system interventions and the first cooperative group checker interventions. Had this been, the researchers would have better been able to determine which intervention was responsible for the greater percentage gains during those first four weeks.

Literature also supports the use of good school/parent/child communication. The teacher researchers felt confident that parents could at any time call school to find out a specific homework assignment. While this intervention was helpful in informing parents, it didn't assist the parents in knowing his/her child had completed the specific assignment. A lack of priority where school is concerned may account for the children who chose not to turn in their work on time.

One of the things the researchers noticed when talking to those involved in the study was that there was some confusion as to what homework comprised. As teachers our definition of homework was daily assignments not completed in class in addition to occasional projects requiring out of school work. It was evident to the researchers that parents and children and even other educational professionals had varied definitions of the term "homework". If this study is to be duplicated a definition of homework needs to be considered.

After analysis of our study a number of findings surfaced that were unexpected. To begin, the researchers felt the baseline percentage of 91% was higher than expected. This may have been due to the fact that the study omitted special education students. In addition, only the following subjects were included: reading, writing, english, and math. Inclusion students were not part of the study because they received alternate teacher instruction during language arts and math time. Furthermore, researchers already had procedures in place to require student to be accountable.

When comparing the baseline percentage with the interventions percentages, the researchers noticed only a minor increase. The

researchers anticipated a higher level of participation.

Additionally, the researchers were disappointed by the fact that only a small percentage of parents actually utilized the automated daily voice system. Once again, 79% of the parent population responded that they would use the automated daily voice system in comparison to the 32% that actually used this system. This percentage could possibly be increased with biweekly reminders to the parents to check the automated voice mail system.

The teacher researchers recommend if this study is to be duplicated identical questions be used on both parent surveys. The second survey was changed by deleting redundant and not applicable questions found on the first survey. When teacher researchers compared results it was difficult to find continuity. Another invalidity of the survey evidenced itself when parents were unrealistic about their child's performance at school. Some parents responded in a manner that contradicted what school records indicated.

Another suggestion to consider in duplicating this study is that a high baseline percentage of homework completion may not raise significantly using these interventions. In order to raise the percentage of students who do their homework parents would be required to monitor and support each child at home. Parents who do not monitor their child's progress with high priority may be giving their child a message that school is not important.

The researchers recommend that if the study was to be duplicated it be implemented at the beginning of the school year. Setting expectations at an early date assists parents in monitoring and supporting their children. Researchers suggest that this strategy be made available throughout the entire school

year. In the year following this study the teacher researchers introduced the interventions at the beginning of the year. While not actively collecting data, the researchers felt that participation by the children and the parents had increased from the prior year. Parent feedback from the automated daily voice mail component has been extremely positive. The teacher researchers continue to use these interventions.

In conclusion the teacher researchers were pleased with the results of using cooperative grouping for peer support in filling out assignment books and organizing backpacks. Parents have expressed feedback in regards to the availability of homework listings by phone. Researchers felt confident knowing parents and students had yet another opportunity to review daily and long term assignments through use of a daily voice message.

"Parents who know their children's teachers and help with the homework and teach their kids right from wrong--these parents can make all the difference." President William J. Clinton as quoted in The Partnership for Family Involvement in Education. The researchers support continued partnership with parents and other family members.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A

TEACHER SURVEY

Appendix A

Teachers' Survey

1. Do you consider the returning of homework to be a problem in your classroom?

   Yes No

2. What percentage of students do not turn in homework regularly?

   _____

3. Do you expect your class to use assignment books?

   Yes No

4. Do you use a phone Homework Hot line as an extra means of communication for daily assignments?

   Yes No

APPENDIX B

TEACHER SURVEY RESULTS

Appendix B

Teacher Survey Results

Question:	#1	#3	#4
% In 'Yes" Answers:	34%	76%	0%

APPENDIX C

STUDENT SURVEY

Appendix C

Student Survey

1. Do you do your homework?

   Yes No

2. Do you write down your homework in your assignment book?

   Yes No

3. Does your homework not get done because your assignment book is left at school?

   Yes No

4. Does your homework not get done because you left the book or worksheets at school?

   Yes No

5. Do your parents ask what your homework is every night?

   Yes No

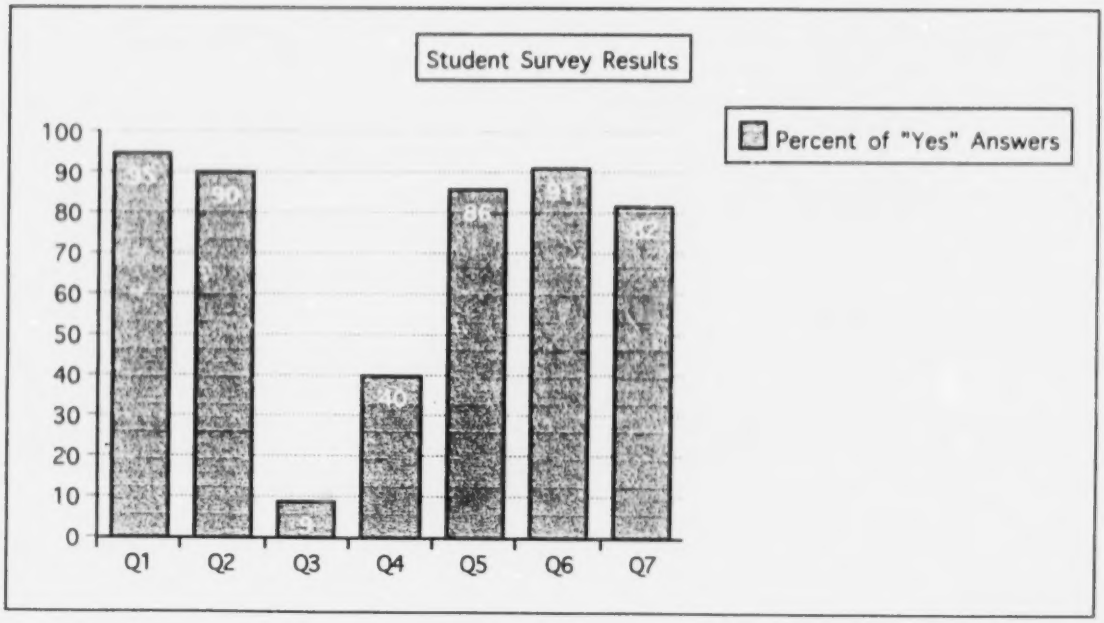
6. Do you understand your homework assignments?

   Yes No

APPENDIX D

STUDENT SURVEY RESULT

Appendix D



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APPENDIX E

PARENT SURVEY #1

Appendix E

Parents' Survey #1

1. Do you have problems getting your child to do his/her homework assignments?

   Yes No

2. Does your child forget to bring home the assignment book?

   Yes No

3. Does your child forget to bring home the book or worksheet required to do the assignments?

   Yes No

4. Does your child have a hard time understanding the homework assignments?

   Yes No

5. Do you have difficulty knowing what is assigned for homework?

   Yes No

6. Do you have difficulty understanding the assignment?

   Yes No

7. Is there a consequence at home if your child's homework is not completed?

   Yes No

8. If there were a Homework Hot Line, via phone line, documenting individual teacher's assignments, would you use it?

   Yes No

APPENDIX F

PARENT SURVEY #1 RESULTS

Appendix F

Parents' Survey #1 Results

1. Do you have problems getting your child to do his/her homework assignments?

   Yes 26%

2. Does your child forget to bring home the assignment book?

   Yes 16%

3. Does your child forget to bring home the book or worksheet required to do the assignments?

   Yes 32%

4. Does your child have a hard time understanding the homework assignments?

   Yes 22%

5. Do you have difficulty knowing what is assigned for homework?

   Yes 31%

6. Do you have difficulty understanding the assignment?

   Yes 21%

7. Is there a consequence at home if your child's homework is not completed?

   Yes 87%

8. If there were a Homework Hot Line, via phone line, documenting individual teacher's assignments, would you use it?

   Yes 79%

APPENDIX G

PARENT LETTER

Appendix G

Parent Letter

Dear Parents,

We are currently enrolled in the Saint Xavier Field Based Masters Program. A requirement for graduation involves an action research project. Our group, Mr. Boberg, Miss Carpenter, Mrs. Haiges, and Mrs. Lundsgaard has chosen the topic "Increased Student Achievement Through Parental Involvement and Increased Student Responsibility."

Research has shown the importance of daily assignments and the subsequent impact they have on student achievement. As a result of this fact the purpose of this study is to see if increased cooperative student involvement and parental communication will improve student responsibility.

The study will be conducted from January 18 through March 12.

In the course of this study, various techniques will be used to help students to take responsibility for their own assignments, and to provide parents with additional assignment information, via an automated voice mail system, that will assist them in helping their children with their accountability.

Grades will not be negatively impacted as a result of this study.

Sincerely,

Tim Boberg, Kerry Carpenter
Shelley Haiges, and Barb Lundsgaard

I, the parent/legal guardian of the minor named below, acknowledge that the teacher has explained to me the need of this research, and offered to answer any questions I may have about the nature of my child;s participation. I freely and voluntarily consent to my child's participation in this study. I understand that all information gathered during the action research project would be completely
confidential.

Name of Minor Participant: _____

Parent Signature: _____

APPENDIX H

PARENT SURVEY #2

Appendix H

Parent Survey #2

Dear Parent(s),

To conclude the study we initiated earlier in the year, we would like you input once again regarding homework assignments. Please take a few minutes from your busy schedule to answer **yes** or **no** to these questions. **Return this survey as soon as possible with your child.** We thank you in advance for you cooperation.

Sincerely,
Mr. Boberg
Miss Carpenter
Mrs. Haiges
Mrs. Lundsgaard

1. Do you have problems getting you child to do his/her homework assignments? Yes No

2. Does your child forget to bring home the assignment book? Yes No

3. Does your child forget to bring home the book or worksheet required to do the assignments? Yes No

4. Do you have difficulty knowing what is assigned for homework? Yes No

5. Did your family use the daily assignment voice message? Yes No

6. If yes, was it useful in helping to know what your child's assignments were? Yes No

7. How many times per week did you use the daily assignment voice message system?_____

Lastly, we're in the process of putting together professional portfolios. In doing this, we'd like your permission to use student artifacts in print, photo, or video form which were obtained throughout the year. Students would **not** be identified. The purpose of the portfolio is to exhibit and demonstrate teaching techniques and general student progress within our classroom. If you have any questions about this, please contact your child's homeroom teacher.

_____

(Parent Signature) (Date)

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APPENDIX I

PARENT SURVEY #2 RESULTS

Appendix I

Parent Survey #2 RESULTS

Dear Parent(s),

To conclude the study we initiated earlier in the year, we would like you input once again regarding homework assignments. Please take a few minutes from your busy schedule to answer **yes** or **no** to these questions. **Return this survey as soon as possible with your child.** We thank you in advance for you cooperation.

Sincerely,
Mr. Boberg
Miss Carpenter
Mrs. Haiges
Mrs. Lundsgaard

1. Do you have problems getting you child to do his/her homework assignments? Yes 24%

2. Does your child forget to bring home the assignment book? Yes 15%

3. Does your child forget to bring home the book or worksheet required to do the assignments? Yes 28%

4. Do you have difficulty knowing what is assigned for homework? Yes 20%

5. Did your family use the daily assignment voice message? Yes 32%

6. If yes, was it useful in helping to know what your child's assignments were? Yes 94%

7. How many times per week did you use the daily assignment voice message system? 3

Lastly, we're in the process of putting together professional portfolios. In doing this, we'd like your permission to use student artifacts in print, photo, or video form which were obtained throughout the year. Students would **not** be identified. The purpose of the portfolio is to exhibit and demonstrate teaching techniques and general student progress within our classroom. If you have any questions about this, please contact your child's homeroom teacher.

_____

(Parent Signature) (Date)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

APPENDIX J

GROUP CHECK LIST #1

Appendix J

Group Checklist #1

Group Name_____
Week of _____

Group Monitor_____

Student Names:	Assignments in Book M T W Th F
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Key
0 = Not finished
Ab = absent
X = completed

APPENDIX K

GROUP CHECK LIST #2

Appendix K

Group Check List #2

Group Name
Week of_____

Group Monitor_____

Student Names:	Assignments in Book					Materials in Backpack				
	M	T	W	Th	F	M	T	W	Th	F
_____	_____					_____				
_____	_____					_____				
_____	_____					_____				
_____	_____					_____				
_____	_____					_____				
_____	_____					_____				

Key
0 = Not finished
Ab = absent
X = completed